



Center for Families, Children & the Courts

Research Update

March 2000

Supervised Visitation: A Look at the Research Literature

When there is concern for the safety or welfare of a child during visits with a noncustodial parent, the court may order that the visits be supervised by a family friend, relative or a professional. The need for high-quality supervision has come to the attention of federal and state authorities. Public concern over the quality of supervision led the Judicial Council of California to develop the Uniform Standards of Practice for Providers of Supervised Visitation. The Judicial Council's Access to Visitation Grant Program distributes federal funds (made available through the Social Security Act, section 469B) to support supervised visitation programs in California.

Recently, the Administrative Office of the Courts' Center for Families, Children & the Courts commissioned a search of research literature on the topic of supervised visitation for the purpose of staying informed about current developments in this field. The researchers examined published literature from the behavioral sciences, social work, education, and medicine. *Supervised Visitation: An Annotated Bibliography*, by Cindy Bruns and Julianne Gray Ludlam, summarizes the 50 articles found in that search. It is available from the Center for Families, Children & the Courts' Web site: www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs. Following, the authors of the review address questions frequently asked about supervised visitation with summaries of the answers offered by the literature.

1. Why order supervised visitation?

The most common reasons for ordering supervised visitation are as follows: (1) proven history or allegations of parental sexual or physical abuse of the child; (2) proven history or allegations of child neglect; (3) history or allegations of domestic violence; (4) reinstatement of visitation after a prolonged absence; (5) impairment of

parenting by a psychiatric illness; (6) history or allegations of substance abuse; (7) parental violation of custody orders, or denial of visitation with the parent; and (8) parental threats to abduct the child(ren).

2. What degree of supervision is offered?

Exchange supervision is limited to the actual exchange of the child(ren) between one parent and the other. The rest of the visitation between the child(ren) and parent is unsupervised.

Off-site supervision involves arrangements made between the supervisor and the parent for visitation to take place in the community. The supervisor accompanies the parent and child(ren) on the outings.

Multiple family group supervision takes place at a visitation center where multiple families use a central visiting space, and, while supervisors monitor the visits, they may not observe every interaction or overhear entire conversations between the parent and child(ren).

One-on-one supervision is the supervision of one parent and his or her child(ren) by one supervisor, conducted in such a way that the supervisor can directly observe the activities and overhear the conversation of the parent and child(ren) at all times.

Therapeutic supervision takes place with a trained mental health professional who not only provides supervision and ensures child safety, but works conjointly with parents and child(ren) to set relationship goals and work toward improvement in some aspect of parental or family functioning.

3. What are reasonable ways to orient children to supervised visitation?

When supervised visitation is explained to a child, the child's cognitive and emotional developmental level should be taken into account. The explanation should be factual, concrete, simple, and connected to the child's particular experience. It should consist of (1) a statement regarding the facts of the situation that led to supervised visitation, (2) a statement about what will happen and how supervised visitation will help, and (3) a statement that supervised visitation is not the result of the child's actions. When there has been a finding of child abuse, it is important to openly acknowledge the abuse and explicitly state that supervised visitation is the result of the parent's abusive behavior, not the child's actions. It is important that parents and supervisors agree upon and use the same explanation with children. Repeating explanations to children in front of their parents increases the likelihood that parents will use the agreed-upon explanation and reduces the potential that children will receive conflicting messages.

4. What is the role of the supervisor of visitation in reporting to the court?

There seems to be a consensus in the field that supervisors are not evaluators, even when that function would be helpful or desirous. However, consensus does not exist on how supervisors should provide information about the progress of visitation to the courts and to other affected parties. It is recommended both in statements of standards of practice and in scholarly writings that supervisors keep records of all visits, documenting any changes in the parent-child relationship and noting positive and negative aspects of each visit. These records should be objective and behavioral, and should not include the opinions or interpretations of the supervisor. Some suggest that the recorded information can be provided to the person overseeing the supervised visitation (e.g., a case manager or a special master) or, with proper releases of information, to a court-appointed evaluator. The overseer of the visitation or the evaluator can, in turn, provide information to the court. Supervisors can thus provide information that may be helpful in determining the best course of action for a child, in a way that is within the purview of their training and competency. Others suggest that supervisors, upon request, create an objective behavioral report, free of opinions and recommendations, and send it to all parties related to the case. The method by which a supervisor reports to the court may depend on the level of the supervisor's training in legal matters in general and court proceedings in particular.

Meet the Researchers



Cindy Bruns, M.A. is currently a doctoral candidate at the California School of Professional Psychology in Alameda, California and a Psychology Intern at Texas Women's University Counseling Center. Her areas of interest are in childhood trauma and the role of relationship quality in the development of resiliency in adulthood.

Julianne Gray Ludlam, M.Ed., received her masters of Education from Harvard University in the area of childhood risk and prevention. She is currently a doctoral student at the California School of Professional Psychology in Alameda, California. Her interests are in the area of childhood trauma and its effects on children.

5. What recommendations and implications does the literature have for the training of supervisors of visitation?

The Supervised Visitation Network, an association of agency and individual providers of supervised visitation, provide extensive guidance concerning the type of training visitation supervisors should receive. According to their standards or practice, supervisors should have a minimum of 10 hours of training, covering topics such as ethics, policies and procedures, observational skills, documentation skills, reflective listening, how to give parents feedback, child development, issues concerning family violence, separation issues for children, and interventions that can be used during visits. Additional training is recommended in boundary setting, assertiveness, the legal contexts of supervised visitation, court testimony, how to structure visits, reporting to referring agencies, and signs of children's psychological distress.

The Uniform Standards of Practice for Providers of Supervised Visitation, section 26.2(c)(4) of the California Standards of Judicial Administration, require providers of supervised visitation to have training on the role of providers, the terms and conditions of supervised visitation, and the legal responsibilities and obligations of providers. The California Standards of Practice further

require that professional and therapeutic providers have additional training in areas of court procedures; record - keeping; child development; conflicts of interest; confidentiality; child abuse reporting laws; and issues relating to substance abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. One major difference between the Uniform Standards of Practice and the Standards and Guidelines for Supervised Visitation Network Practice is that the California standards outline different levels of training, depending on who is actually providing the service. The training requirements increase with the degree of professionalism required of the provider.

The psychological literature on visitation also has implications for training. In order to appropriately support and intervene with parents and children, supervisors must avoid taking sides or making judgments about whether the supervision is necessary. Neutrality can be difficult to maintain, given the reasons for which families are often referred to supervision. Therefore, training for supervisors should include a section designed to increase self-awareness about reactions to the reasons for supervised visitation, how these reactions might influence behaviors, and methods of coping with resultant beliefs and feelings so they do not influence the provision of supervision. In conjunction, training about the dynamics and issues of various family problems (e.g., addiction, violence, mental illness), how the family dynamics may unconsciously influence the supervisor, and how to remove oneself from the family dynamic also may increase supervisor neutrality and effectiveness. Finally, some training in working with special visitation populations should help supervisors of visitation provide better-quality services. These special populations include traumatized children and parents, parents with serious mental illness, and parents with personality disorders.

6. When is supervised visitation no longer required?

The research literature offers few guidelines to determining when supervised visitation is no longer required. However, practitioners have proposed some criteria: (1) if the parent who is the cause of the supervision order is amenable to treatment, he or she must have successfully completed an appropriate treatment program; (2) the documentation provided by the supervisor must indicate that the parent-child relationship is one of high quality and appears to be flourishing; and (3) a change in visitation could reasonably be assumed not to cause physical or psychological harm to the child. In the case of familial domestic violence, in addition to the three criteria just listed, a cessation of threats and/or use of violence by the perpetrator must have lasted for an extended period

of time before the use of supervised visitation is discontinued.

7. How does supervised visitation in Family Court Services compare with supervised visitation under Child Protection Services?

Supervision may occur one-on-one, in a group, or off-site for parents and children referred from either Family Court Services (FCS) or Child Protective Services (CPS). There may, however, be some differences in the manners in which supervised visitation is administered and the purposes for which it is used. When divorce precipitates supervised visitation, the supervisor tends to be either an agreed-upon neutral party or a supervision center. When a foster-care placement precipitates supervised visitation, the supervisor tends to be either the CPS caseworker or the foster family. For children in foster care, the demands on a caseworker's time or difficult feelings between the foster family and the biological family may limit the frequency of supervised visitation. Children in divorcing families do not seem to have this particular problem. In both divorce and foster-care situations, supervised visitation can be used for evaluation purposes and for creating a safe context in which the relationship between the parent and the child can be sustained. Visitation in dependency cases may serve the additional purpose of preserving, for the child, some sense of belonging to the biological family when the permanency plan does not include a return to the child's family of origin.

8. How does supervised visitation affect children, parents, and child-parent relationships?

Research on the effects of participating in supervised visitation is in its infancy, and there are almost no data in the literature about the effectiveness of supervised visitation. The available data suggest that visiting parents may find themselves more able to relax and enjoy visiting with their children in a supervised setting, and that these parents believe their children are also more able to relax and enjoy themselves during the visit. In addition, there may be a relationship between participating in supervised visitation and improvement in children's social skills. Other research, however, has found no improvement in inter-parental relationships (e.g., reduced conflict between parents) or child-parent relationships following participation in supervised visitation, nor has it found any relationship between participation and improvement in reported child behavior problems. Additional studies are needed to adequately answer this question.

The Center for Families, Children & the Courts

Diane Nunn, J.D., Director

Isolina Ricci, Ph.D., Assistant Director

Charlene Depner, Ph.D., Supervising Research Analyst

Andrea Lash, Ph.D., Research Grants Coordinator

The Center for Families, Children & the Courts generates and distributes research-based information that has promise for informing the work of family and juvenile courts in California and nationwide. To learn more about the work of our office, visit our Web site: www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs.

Center for Families, Children, and the Courts
Administrative Office of the Courts
455 Golden Gate Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94102-3660

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

**Judicial Council of California
Administrative Office of the Courts
Center for Families, Children & the Courts**

The preparation of these materials was financially assisted through a grant from the Judicial Council of California.

The opinions, findings, and conclusions in the report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Judicial Council.